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TAGS: IS_KMDR MEDIA REACTION REPORT
SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

- 11. Mideast
- 12. Greater Middle East Initiative

Key stories in the media:

The media reported that PM Sharon is slated to meet today in Jerusalem with the three U.S. diplomatic envoys (Stephen Hadley and Elliott Abrams from the White House and William Burns from the State Department) about the plan for unilateral disengagement from the Palestinians and what the U.S. will give Israel in exchange for the planned withdrawal from Gaza and the evacuation of settlements in the West Bank. Ha'aretz writes that the relationship between the number of settlements Israel evacuates in the West Bank and the depth of the U.S. recognition of the settlement blocs of Ariel, Ma'aleh Adumim and Gush Etzion, which Israel wants to annex in any future peace agreement, will be at the core of the talks. Ha'aretz reported that ahead of the envoys' visit, U.S. Ambassador Daniel Kurtzer sent Washington some 30 comprehensive questions that the diplomats will ask Sharon, starting with how many settlements will be evacuated in the West Bank.

Maariv (Ben Caspit) led by divulging a document drafted by Israel's National Security Council, headed by disengagement coordinator Giora Eiland. The document urges Sharon not to abandon the Philadelphi road but rather to expand the buffer zone between the Gaza Strip and Egypt, and not to dismantle the three most northern settlements in the strip. The National Security Council is offering Sharon four alternatives for settlement removal and IDF troop redeployment there. The National Security Council recommends that one of the alternatives, a large move that creates sufficient conditions for creating an independent Palestinian state, be presented to the U.S. "as an objective and conduct negotiations to secure formal international support for the move, with a commitment that there will be no further political demands from Israel until the Palestinian state that is to be established implements the first stage of Bush's vision and the road map." The document also recommends not to leave military forces in the Gaza Strip after the evacuation, not to destroy the infrastructure of the Israeli settlements that are to be evacuated, but rather to make an effort to turn them over to 'someone,' and to evacuate the Gush Katif bloc of settlements in full. The document says that among the issues that need clarifications are the future of Gaza's airport and seaport.

Jerusalem Post quoted senior diplomatic officials as saying Wednesday that Sharon will discuss the future of settlements to be evacuated in Gaza with Palestinian PM Ahmed Qurei when the two meet next week. Leading media reported that Egypt is pressing the PA to hold the meeting. Jerusalem Post quoted FM Silvan Shalom as saying Wednesday that it is clear the PA would agree to such a meeting before Sharon travels to Washington in order to prevent Sharon from saying in the U.S. that there is no one on the other side with whom to talk.

All media reported that five members of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades were killed in Jenin Wednesday by an IDF undercover unit. The men were reportedly on their way to carry out an attack on the settlement of Kadim near Jenin. All media also cite the Shin Bet as saying that members of a Palestinian terror cell in Khan Yunis (southern Gaza Strip) who received funds, instructions

and training from Hizbullah operatives in Lebanon were arrested Wednesday. The media reported that a high state of alert in Jerusalem was declared Wednesday and lowered this morning.

Israel Radio reported that Tourism Minister Benny Elon (National Union) has hired the services of a New York PR agency to explain his opposition to the disengagement plan. The radio reported that Construction and Housing Minister Effi Eitam (National Religious Party - NRP) is leaving for the U.S., and that the same agency published a press release on his behalf with a similar message. Ha'aretz reported that the NRP is divided over when to quit the government, and that Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin (Likud) now represents a major source of opposition to Sharon's plan.

Ha'aretz and Israel Radio quoted A/S William Burns as testifying Wednesday before the House Committee on International Relations that the U.S. Administration will act soon to impose firm sanctions on Syria, which it accuses of terrorism.

Maariv reported that during the talks Egyptian intelligence chief Omar Suleiman held with Israeli and PA leaders, Egypt agreed to monitor elements that could perturb the stability in the Gaza Strip following the IDF's withdrawal, but not to take up security responsibility there. Leading media reported that Wednesday the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elected Rouhi Fatouh from Gaza City, a close ally of PA Chairman Yasser Arafat, as its speaker. Ha'aretz says that the move is being seen in the PA as Arafat's first significant internal response to Sharon's plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip. This morning, Israel Radio quoted Arafat as saying that he welcomes the disengagement plan, provided it leads to Israel's withdrawal from all the Palestinian territories. The media continued to publish contradictory reports about possible Likud-Labor contacts regarding the formation of a national unity government. Labor Party Chairman Shimon Peres was quoted as saying at a public party venue that there are no such contacts. Former PM Ehud Barak called Sharon's disengagement "serious" and said that he favors Labor's entry into the government when the right-wing parties leave it.

Yediot and Maariv reported that on May 1, as 10 new nations join the EU, 1 million Israelis (Maariv: 1.1 million) will be entitled to an EU passport. The newspapers cited data provided Wednesday by Ambassador Giancarlo Chevallard, who heads the EU delegation in Israel. Ha'aretz and Maariv cited the results of a poll conducted in December 2003 by Mina Zemach (Dahaf Institute) for the EU delegation in Israel [NB: some of the findings were printed by either of the two newspapers]:

-85 percent of Israelis believe that membership in the EU is very important for Israel (up from 77 percent in February 2003).

-55 percent of respondents believe that relations with the U.S. contribute more to Israel than its relations with the EU (down from 62 percent in February 2003).

-74 percent of respondents claim that the EU is one-sided in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

-55 percent of respondents believe that EU financial aid to the Palestinians harms Israel's interests (down from 64 percent in February 2003).

-Two thirds of respondents believe that the EU's attitude vis-a-vis Israel is anti-Semitic under pretenses of moral principles.

Ha'aretz reported that a spiritual center for Ethiopian immigrants was dedicated Wednesday in Lod. The institution is funded by the Chicago-based International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, which donated some 1.5 million shekels (about USD 334,000) for the construction of the building.

11. Mideast:

Summary:

Columnist Ari Shavit wrote in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz: "[Sharon] understands that perpetuating the occupation is more dangerous for Israel than Hamas growing stronger.... But the manner in which Sharon is promoting his strategic idea is intolerable."

Diplomatic correspondent Aluf Benn wrote in Ha'aretz: "Now the fate of [Sharon's] plan rests in the hands of two people -- George W. Bush and Binyamin Netanyahu."

Middle East affairs commentator Guy Bechor, a lecturer at the Interdisciplinary Center, wrote in mass-circulation, pluralist *Yediot Aharonot*: "Israel should awaken and make the chaos theory, which has been turned against it, into a weapon for its benefit."

Block Quotes:

II. "Not Serious"

Columnist Ari Shavit wrote in independent, left-leaning *Ha'aretz* (March 11): "As far as the fundamental strategic idea is concerned, Sharon is right. His determination to evacuate the entire Gaza Strip is impressive. His intention to open the Gaza-Egypt border is creative and interesting. His thoughts of a complementary evacuation of parts of the West Bank are brave and far-reaching. It seems that Sharon has finally -- and belatedly -- internalized the fact that the main threat facing Israel is demographic, not terrorist. He understands that perpetuating the occupation is more dangerous for Israel than Hamas growing stronger.... But the manner in which Sharon is promoting his strategic idea is intolerable.... There is not even the start of an understanding with the Americans regarding the stabilizing mechanism that will be introduced to absorb the massive jolts that will accompany the withdrawal.... The next few months will be critical. The way in which the withdrawal plan is formulated over the coming months will determine whether Israel finally disengages itself from the kiss of death that is a binational existence. It will determine whether, after 37 years of folly, Israel is able to withdraw back into its own borders and to take its destiny in its own hands. The way in which Sharon's bureau handles the withdrawal has generated some very serious questions."

II. "Between Bush and Netanyahu"

Diplomatic correspondent Aluf Benn wrote in *Ha'aretz* (March 11): "Now the fate of the plan rests in the hands of two people -- George W. Bush and Binyamin Netanyahu. The president will determine what Israel gets for an evacuation. The finance minister is the key to the support of most of the Likud ministers for the plan. There's a vicious circle involved in this. Netanyahu is demanding Sharon bring an impressive 'compensation package' from the Americans. For that the Americans need a substantial withdrawal from the West Bank.... But a deep withdrawal from the West Bank will make it difficult for [Likud ministers] Netanyahu, Limor Livnat and Danny Naveh to support the plan, for ideological reasons and for another reason raised by Livnat: Israel will be losing territorial bargaining cards.... The Likud is convinced that Shimon Peres and his colleagues in Labor are so hungry for power that they won't be deterred on their way into Sharon's government by the police investigations and Sharon scandals.... [But] breakthroughs, from Sadat's visit and through Madrid, Oslo, the Lebanon withdrawal and the disengagement plan, were all born in narrow governments. It is difficult to tell whether Sharon and Peres will break that tradition or bury both the withdrawal from Gaza and the planned evacuations in the West Bank, instead."

III. "Who's Afraid of Chaos?"

Middle East affairs commentator Guy Bechor, a lecturer at the Interdisciplinary Center, wrote in mass-circulation, pluralist *Yediot Aharonot* (March 11): "On the eve of Israel's disengagement from the entire Gaza Strip, the Arab rulers have once again brandished their secret weapon saved for emergencies: the 'chaos

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theory.' This theory contends that without the Arab rulers, chaos ('fawda' in Arabic) will reign in the Middle East, and that they -- Mubarak, Abdullah, Arafat, Assad and Qadhafi -- are guarding Israel from it.... The Palestinians are currently engaged in disseminating warnings that Israel's evacuation from Gaza will lead to chaos. Tony Blair has already bought this argument from Abu Ala during his visit to London, and other European leaders are following suit. But this seems to be a false alarm. Hamas, which belongs to the school of thought of the Muslim Brotherhood, will not confront the PA head-on due to its ideological structure, especially since its strength there is much smaller than the Palestinian Authority's police and army forces even in its present situation. In general, it is time to understand that the chaos theory does not have a leg to stand on. Three and a half years after

the outbreak of the Intifada, Israel should awaken and make the chaos theory, which has been turned against it, into a weapon for its benefit. It should say to the Arab leaders: the chaos you talk about is not proof of our need to stay in the Gaza Strip, but rather the reverse -- it is our reason to disengage from it completely. The chaos will thereby turn from the friend of the Arab leaders into our friend."

12. Greater Middle East Initiative:

Summary:

Left-leaning contributor Larry Derfner wrote in conservative, independent Jerusalem Post: "Something is out of whack here. The Likudniks and Republicans, who have the lowest opinion of the Arabs, are also claiming to have the highest aspirations for them."

Block Quotes:

"The Arabs' New Friends"

Left-leaning contributor Larry Derfner wrote in conservative, independent Jerusalem Post (March 11): "Something is out of whack here. The Likudniks and Republicans, who have the lowest opinion of the Arabs, are also claiming to have the highest aspirations for them.... Despite what President Bush seems to think, a democrat is not somebody who just wants to be free; a democrat is somebody who also wants his political opponents to be free. But nobody is really going to want his political opponents to be free if he's convinced that their freedom will mean the end of his own, and in the Arab Middle East this is a wholly justified fear. It's the guiding principle of politics in the region, which is why Arab democracy has never gotten off the ground.... The truth is that several Arab dictatorships are repressing their people's clamor for war with Israel or Islamic revolution. So far, none has been found repressing a popular desire for anything that could be called democracy. Liberals don't like to talk about this because they're afraid of being called racists. Right-wingers know this about liberals, of course, which is why they can go on singing about Arab democracy (while daydreaming about future invasions) with little interruption."

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